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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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EB-07 AID-05 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /071 W
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R 031005Z MAR 76
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4395

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 3211

FOLLOWING TEL BOMBAY 0543 DTD 03 MAR 76 RCVD NEW DELHI
BEING REPEATED TO YOU. QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOMBAY 0543

NOFORN

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT IN
SUBJECT: GUJARAT

REF: BOMBAY 522

1. SUMMARY: A KEEN OBSERVER OF GUJARAT SITUATION WITH GOOD CONTACTS IN THAT STATE BELIEVES THAT JANATA FRONT GOV'T WILL SURVIVE CURRENT BUDGET SESSION AND MAY ENDURE SEVERAL MONTHS LONGER UNLESS CENTER EXERCISES FAR MORE PRESSURE IN EFFORT TO TOPPLE BABUBHAI PATEL'S GOVERNMENT THERE. END SUMMARY.

2. MEMBER OF THE LOCAL CONSULAR CORPS, WHO FREQUENTLY TRAVELS TO GUJARAT AND IS WELL ACQUAINTED WITH MOST OF THE POLITICAL LEADERS IN THAT STATE, HAS CONCLUDED AS A RESULT OF A TRIP TO GUJARAT LAST WEEK THAT BABUBHAI PATEL WILL NOT ONLY SURVIVE CURRENT BUDGET SESSION, BUT MAY ENDURE WELL BEYOND, BARRING A DETERMINED EFFORT BY MRS GANDHI TO BRING DOWN THE FRONT GOVERNMENT. OUR SOURCE, WHO HAS BEEN RELIABLE IN PAST, TRAVELLED EXTENSIVELY IN GUJARAT LAST
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WEEK AND TALKED WITH A WIDE GROUP OF POLITICIANS, BUSINESSMEN AND CIVIL SERVANTS. AMONG THEM WERE CHIEF MINISTER BABUBHAI PATEL,

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SEVERAL MEMBERS OF PATEL'S GOVERNMENT, CONGRESS (':) LEADER HITENDRA DESAI, FORMER CHIEF MINISTER CHIMANBHAI PATEL, VALLABHAI PATEL AND CHIEF SECRETARY L.R.DALAL, WHO RETIRED YESTERDAY. OUR INFORMANT FOUND BABUBHAI SURPRISINGLY BUOYANT ALTHOUGH SOMEWHAT FATIGUED. BABUBHAI CLAIMS HIS GREATEST PROBLEM AT PRESENT IS TO CARRY HIS CASE TO THE PEOPLE, AND PARTICULARLY TO HIS LOWER LEVEL LIEUTENANTS IN THE FACE OF PRESS CENSORSHIP WHICH EFFECTIVELY FORCES HIM TO COMMUNICATE WITH HIS FOLLOWERS BY WORD OF MOUTH. PATEL STILL MAINTAINS, AS HE TOLD US CONSUL GENERAL LAST NOVEMBER, THAT WHILE PRESS CENSORSHIP IS A HINDERANCE, IT IS NOT A LODESTONE ON THE FRONT'S PURSUIT OF THEIR POLITICAL OBJECTIVES IN GUJARAT. HE TOLD OUR SOURCE THAT MRS GANDHI'S TOTAL CONTROL OF ALL-INDIA RADIO'S EMISSIONS WAS PROBABLY A GREATER ASSET FOR HER THAN HER NEGATIVE POWERS OVER WHAT THE PRESS PRINTS.

3. BABHUBHAI CLAIMS TO HAVE FOUND TWO DEVICES WHICH HE BELIEVES WILL PREVENT CONGRESS (R) FROM FORMING A MAJORITY IN THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY TO VOTE HIM OUT OF OFFICE. HE MAINTAINS THAT HE HAS SIGNATURES OF 92 OF HIS FOLLOWERS (OUT OF A TOTAL HOUSE MEMBERSHIP OF 179) ON DOCUMENTS PROMISING NOT TO CROSS PARTY LINES WITHOUT FIRST RESIGNING FROM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY. RESIGNATION, OF COURSE, REQUIRES A NEW ELECTION FOR THE VACATED SEAT WITHIN 33 DAYS. WOULD-BE DEFECTOR WOULD THEN HAVE TO RUN ON PLATFORM OF NEW PARTY AND FRONT COULD FIELD OPPONENT AGAINST THE DEFECTOR. BABUBHAI ALSO SAYS THAT HE HAS THE WORD OF ABOUT 10 MEMBERS OF THE CONGRESS (R) GROUP THAT THEY WOULD NOT JOIN ANY GROUP OF DEFECTORS TO VOTE HITENDRA DESAI IN POWER. BABUBHAI CLAIMS THAT CONGRESS (R) IS ALSO FACTION RIDDEN UNDER DESAI'S LEADERSHIP AND IF LATTER CAME CLOSE TO WINNING POWER THROUGH DEFECTION ROUTE IN ASSEMBLY, SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF CONGRESS (R) LEGISLATORS WOULD ABSTAIN TO PREVENT HITENDRA FROM COMING TO POWER.

4. OUR SOURCE CLAIMS THAT HE DISCUSSED THESE POSSIBILITIES DIRECTLY WITH HITENDRA DESAI, WHO ADMITTED THAT HIS OWN PROPECTS FOR VOTING FRONT OUT OF OFFICE HAVE DIMINISHED AS CAMPAIGN AGAINST BUDGET FLAGGED. HITENDRA ALSO REPORTEDLY SAID THAT MRS GANDHI DOES NOT WISH TO IMPOSE PRESIDENTIAL RULE IN GUJARAT IF THAT COURSE CAN BE AVOIDED. SHE REPORTEDLY FEELS THAT HER GUJARATI OPPONENTS WOULD GO UNDERGROUND AND COULD BECOME A FESTERING CANCER IF THEY ARE
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ARBITRARILY REMOVED FROM THE GOVERNMENT. HITENDRA ALSO REPORTEDLY BELIEVES THAT CENTER HAS DECIDED AGAINST SNAP NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN MAY, SO HE SAYS NO URGENT NEED ON CENTER'S PART FOR GETTING RID OF THE FRONT GOVERNMENT. HE NOW INTERPRETS THE WORD HE IS GETTING FROM NEW DELHI AS AN INDICATION THAT THE CENTER WANTS TO PURSUE CAMPAIGN OF ATTRITION AGAINST BABUBHAI.

5. OUR SOURCE SAYS THAT MOST POLITICIANS IN GUJARAT ARE DISGUSTED BY CHIMANBHAI PATEL'S MANEUVERINGS OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS. THEY BELIEVE HE HAS BEEN ALTOGETHER INEPT AND HAS DISSIPATED WHATEVER

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REMAINED OF HIS ONCE CONSIDERABLE STRENGTH. CHIEF SECRETARY DALAL, WHO HAS BEEN CONSIDERED UNSYMPATHETIC TOWARD FRONT, TOLD OUR SOURCE THAT HE CONSIDERED BABUBHAI PATEL'S CHANCES OF SURVIVAL TO BE AT LEAST 50 PER CENT OVER THE NEXT MONTH. OUR INFORMANT SAYS THAT BY DISCOUNTING DESAI'S WELL-KNOWN ANTIPATHY TO FRONT, THIS SHOULD BE INTERPRETED AS INDICATING DALAL REALLY BELIEVES THE FRONT HAS A MUCH BETTER THAN EVEN CHANCE OF CONTINUING IN POWER OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS.

6. WHEN SOURCE ASKED BABUBHAI ABOUT CONSEQUENCES OF WITHDRAWAL OF PROPOSAL FOR TAXING CASH CROPS, PATEL REPLIED THAT MANEUVER WAS NOT A SETBACK BUT A VICTORY FOR HIM. HE SAYS HE RETAINED MUCH MORE THAN HE EXPECTED IN TERMS OF ADDITIONAL TAXATION ON RICH FARMERS WHO HAVE THUS FAR ESCAPED PAYING THEIR FAIR SHARE OF TAXES. HE BELIEVES THAT HE IS RECEIVING CONSIDERABLE CREDIT IN THE CITIES FOR WHAT IS REGARDED AS COURAGEOUS EFFORT TO SPREAD THE TAX BURDEN MORE EQUITABLY.

7. WHEN ASKED ABOUT PROSPECTS FOR PRESIDENTIAL RULE, BABUBHAI DOUBTED MRS GANDHI WOULD WANT TO GO THAT ROUTE EXCEPT IN EXTREMIS. HE BELIEVES HER CURRENT TACTICS ARE TO WEAR HIM DOWN, BUT IF SHE WISHES TO DO AWAY WITH HIS GOV'T, HE CONSIDERS THAT SHE HAS A VERY EASY ROUTE. ALL SHE NEEDS TO DO IS ORDER HIM TO PUT ONE OF HIS IMPORTANT SUPPORTERS IN DETENTION UNDER MISA, THEN HE WOULD BE DAMNED, WHICHEVER WAY HE RESPONDED.

8. COMMENT: WHILE THE SIGNIFICANCE, IF NOT THE ACTUAL EXISTENCE, OF 92 SIGNATURES ON ANTI-DEFECTION LETTERS MAY WELL BE QUESTIONED, THERE IS NO DOUBT BUT WHAT BABUBHAI PATEL HAS PROVEN TO BE A TOUGH AND RESILIENT OPPONENT IN GUJARAT. STORIES HAVE ABOUNDED FOR THE PAST MONTH PREDICTING HIS IMMINENT DOWNFALL, BUT EACH TIME HE
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SURFACES SMILING AND SHOWING SIGNS OF CONTINUED BUOYANCY. THE CONGEN BELIEVES THAT OUR SOURCE HAS THE EXCELLENT CONTACTS HE CLAIMS, AND HIS READING MAY WELL BE CORRECT. HOWEVER, WE HAVE LITTLE CAPACITY FOR TESTING HIS CONCLUSIONS. WE ARE INCLINED HOWEVER TO AGREE THAT IT WILL TAKE MORE PRESSURE FROM THE CENTER THAN HAS BEEN APPLIED THUS FAR TO BRING THE FRONT DOWN.
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